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INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE  
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RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0456  
RUEHDO/AMEMBASSY DOHA 0379  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0438  
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 1980  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0782  
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RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS  
RUEHDS/USMISSION USAU ADDIS ABABA  
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 0502  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0887

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 000124

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/09/2019  
TAGS: KDEM MR PGOV PREL  
SUBJECT: ROSSO MAYOR: "I AM THE MOST SANCTIONED PERSON IN MAURITANIA"

REF: 08 NOUAKCHOTT 682

Classified By: Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Six months after the coup, the southwestern city of Rosso (Trarza region) is feeling the pressure. The World Bank has suspended two key projects -- a marketplace reconstruction and an advanced rain water canal. The canal, 70 percent complete, has filled with stagnant water and poses health and safety risks. Although reluctant to share his views, Rosso mayor Yerim Fassa feels he is "the most sanctioned man in Mauritania.". Suspended programs reflect badly on him and hurt his constituents. Following the coup, the mayor expressed support of General Aziz, but his statements and demeanor during a recent meeting with PolOff and PolAsst are far from those of an ardent putchist. End summary.

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What Keeps Them Up at Night  
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¶2. (C) PolOff visited Rosso on February 8 to assess the political climate six months after the coup. A/DATT also went to Rosso to monitor progress on the DoD fire station project and to assess security conditions along the border. Rosso, located on the Senegal river at this main crossing point between Mauritania and Senegal. Upon arrival, the team was informed that the mayor and his assistant were in Nouakchott but that they would be received by Secretary General El Hadj M'Bodj. The first item on M'Bodj's agenda was the unfinished World Bank canal. Rosso authorities are concerned about the health and safety risks posed by the unfinished canal. They also fear heavy flooding during the rainy season that, with the canal as it is, could destroy roads and walls. M'Bodj stated they have attempted to contact the World Bank. He said someone told him World Bank personnel had been instructed to avoid all contact with Mauritanian authorities.

Comment: PolOff visited the canal and confirmed M'Bodj's reports. The construction area is not secured. It is a mosquito breeding center; some roads are closed as the canal runs through the town and there are no "bridges" or safety barriers. End comment.

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The Way to Constitutional Order  
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13. (C) In a meeting with PolAsst in November 2008 (reftel), El Hadj M'Bodj did not comment on political issues. He believed that Nouakchott politics had little impact on local lives. Nevertheless, while reaffirming that sanitation and health remained Rosso's main concern, he openly shared his thoughts about General Aziz's candidacy and the upcoming elections. M'Bodj, a coup supporter, thinks that the June election will bring Mauritania back to constitutional order. When asked about the transparency of such elections, he stated the General will most likely retire from the military two months before the election and hand over the country to the President of the Senate in order to focus on his campaign. He seems to think these actions would be sufficiently transparent. He believes General Aziz has the Mauritanian people's support but is not backed by the political parties. M'Bodj highlighted that Rosso has seen a decline in food and fuel prices since the coup. (Note: A town hall assistant who accompanied PolOff and A/DATT to the fire station confided that the economic situation in the city is declining. End note.)

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Coup Detractors at the Police Station  
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14. (C) PolOff and A/DATT also met with Police Chief Mohamed Bairuk at the Rosso ferry police station. Police chief Bairuk spoke little French and did not wish to talk politics. He was accompanied by Abdallahi Sid' Ahmed, a member of his family who works for an NGO in Keur Massene and Nouakchott.

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Sid Ahmed told PolOff that Mauritians are worried about the political situation and that they oppose the coup. He intimated the junta has lied about the extent of popular support for General Aziz. According to Sid' Ahmed, people are scared of international sanctions and believe that "the junta has to go if the international community is against it." He mentioned Ould Daddah's "alarming" declaration about international sanctions. He said Mauritians counted on the United States to help and gave PolOff his telephone number saying he would like to talk more outside the police station.

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The Most Sanctioned Person in Mauritania  
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15. (C) PolOff and PolAsst followed up with a visit to Mayor Yerim Fassa on February 9 at his medical office in Nouakchott. (Note: According to Political LES, Fassa, a retired colonel and long-time director of the Military Hospital in Nouakchott, is a Wolof cardiologist and fervent RFD militant. End Note.) The mayor seemed pleased with the visit and stressed that the unfinished World Bank canal is a problem. He deplored the World Bank's project suspension and other western cutbacks. He said he had asked the government to fund completion and made a phone call (during the meeting) to confirm that the \$245 million needed had been allocated. (Comment: PolOff and PolAsst question the veracity of these statements. End comment.)

16. (C) When asked about the political crisis, the mayor blurted quote it is preoccupying and dangerous end quote. He said the situation now is worse than under President Abdallahi. Under President Abdallahi the "blockage" was between civilians whereas now civilians and the military oppose each other in what could be an explosive mixture. After this, Fassa's demeanor changed; he seemed chagrined at having said too much. Then he asked PolOff if she was a journalist and protested saying quote he thought the meeting was about the fire station end quote. After much reassurance, he answered a few other questions. When asked if he feared violence, he responded that everything is possible and noted the disturbances in Madagascar. A

peaceful demonstration could lead to violence, he stated. When questioned about constitutional changes, he said it was much too soon. He mentioned he even doubted funds to organize elections were available.

¶7. (C) Regarding General Aziz's candidacy, Fassa stated that the ideal situation would be for Aziz to step down and run quote like any other civilian in a boubou end quote. He implied it was unfortunate the General was still in power and planning to run for president. Then he stressed that President Abdallahi should not finish his mandate and said the USG should not continue lobbying for his return. Abdallahi's role should be to bring calm by voluntarily renouncing his mandate, he stated. If General Aziz retires from the military, a new election should be enough to bring back constitutional order. Comment: Fassa's rejection of General Aziz's candidacy is in line with the RFD's position. Nevertheless, his tacit acceptance of elections organized under military auspices is not. End comment.

¶8. (C) When asked whether Mauritanians fear sanctions, the mayor reacted strongly: "Rosso is already under sanctions! I am the most sanctioned man in Mauritania! End Quote. He regretted what the unfinished canal had done to his image and on the well-being of Rosso.

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Trafficking in Rosso  
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¶9. (C) The mayor expressed concern about trafficking between Senegal and Mauritania. He said there is increased movement of hashish and consumables such as gas, oil and food. When questioned further about drug trafficking, he confirmed there is drug trafficking but did not elaborate.

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¶10. (C) Comment: The junta claims it has the support of most of the country's mayors. Nevertheless, Mayor Fassa illustrates how a junta-friendly mayor can be luke warm at best. Fassa is aware of the coup's opportunity costs and is suffering from the international aid freeze. Mayor Fassa may exemplify how sanctions can erode support for the regime. We will stay in touch with him to see how things progress. End comment.

HANKINS